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Book Review: The Fifties

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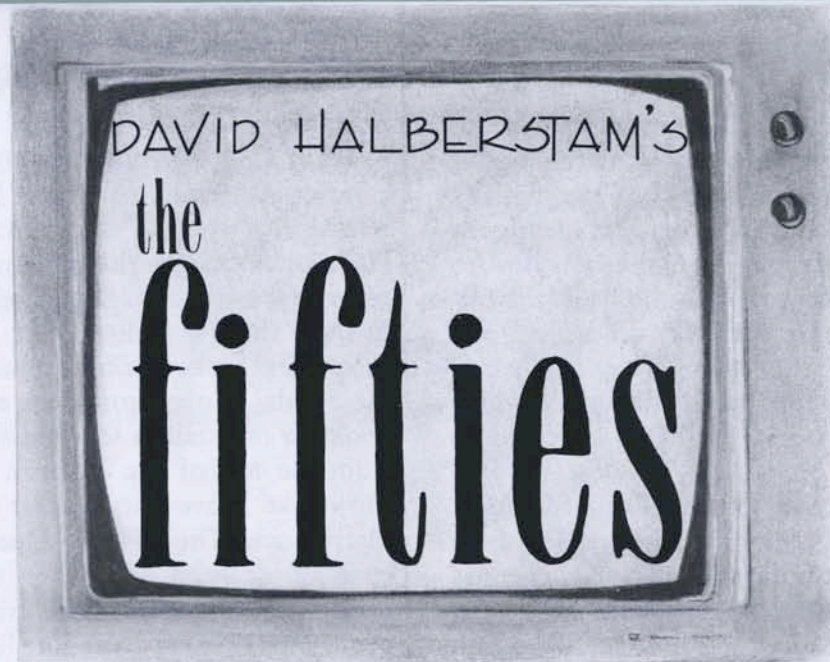


Illustration by RACHEL LEPINE

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David Halberstam's *The Fifties* will come to rest on many bookshelves sandwiched between Godel, Escher, Bach and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, much praised and little read. Halberstam has in magisterial detail reconstructed the decade of Eisenhower, Elvis, and *East of Eden*. His interest, he tells us in an 'Author's Note' tucked behind the index, was "to write a book which would not only explore what happened in the fifties. . .but in addition show why the sixties took place—because so many of the forces which exploded in the sixties had begun to come together in the fifties, as the pace of life in America quickened" (799). Unaware at the outset that Halberstam means to view the fifties as launching the rocket that burst in the sixties, the reader proceeds through his narrative wondering what trajectory the book is describing. Made aware of the intent, the reader wonders what exactly Halberstam finds in the fifties that explains why the sixties happened.

The Fifties commences with America's anxious response to entering the atomic age. "It was a mean time. The nation was ready for a witch hunt" (9). Halberstam uses the career of J. Robert Oppenheimer to document the several kind of meanness—accusations of fellow-traveling, anti-semitism,

professional jealousy—that underlay the political and scientific debates early in the decade. He closes *The Fifties* with the Kennedy-Nixon debate where the witch-hunting continued—who was responsible for the 'missile gap'?—albeit on a more elevated plane. Between these events Halberstam recounts the stories of politicians, businessmen, entertainers, and crusaders. His chapters segue from MacArthur and the Korean War to Mickey Spillane, from Indochina to Brown vs. the Board of Education, from *I Love Lucy* to birth control research. Reading *The Fifties* is like catching up on a decade's worth of *The New York Times* in a few sittings. As is frequently the case with reading newspapers, it's the quirky, off-beat features that linger in memory. I mention this because, without some frame of reference for holding together the many events Halberstam records, the reader begins to reconstruct the fifties on the basis of personal understandings. A reader like myself, who grew from childhood to late adolescence during the decade, has his memory refreshed and restocked out of Halberstam's record. But I found myself establishing the relations between characters and events on the basis of their present manifestations. I can only explain Halberstam's difficulty in focusing the

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fifties in terms of my own inability to hold American history in focus. For certainly events of the sixties exploded the many myths Americans had traditionally employed to hold their national history and identity in focus. Halberstam, too, no longer quite knows how to endow our past with meaning. What he does, then, is concoct a decade of images that play off against one another in his readers' interior space. They finally create a past that resembles some verbal video show where images of the past float free of historical context and continuity.

From this perspective, some of *The Fifties* most memorable and most interesting chapters relate how certain entrepreneurs, intuiting the enormous energies about to be released in post-war America, created businesses that altered the American landscape. William Levitt constructed affordable housing to meet returning GIs' demand for suburban living space. Gene Ferkauf organized E. J. Korvette's discount stores to supply these homes with furniture and appliances. Kemmons Wilson almost literally dreamed up Holiday Inns to satisfy the growing demand for inexpensive, clean travel accommodations. And Ray Kroc located a McDonalds nearby the homes, stores, and motels, serving and making billions. Halberstam tells the stories of these entrepreneurs without any trace of the anti-commerce bias so common to the fifties trained intellectual. He admires the foresight and perseverance these entrepreneurs displayed in making their ideas work. Where an earlier account of what these men achieved might well have decried the effect of this commercial architecture on the American countryside, its schlock effect so to speak, today this architecture defines the landscape and fascinates the critic like Halberstam who realizes that intellectually these entrepreneurs started the breakdown between high and popular culture such that today no critic can really draw any meaningful distinction between them. Indeed, the sixties did explode the basis for such elite criticism by the rapidity with which commercialization subsumed the radical critique. This commercialization was not so much a corrupt bargain intellectuals made with the agents of commerce as it was a natural response to the demands of the economic system in which everyone functioned.

Television made this economic system both more and less apparent to all, and *The Fifties*, if it contains any unifying theme for the reader at all, tells the story of how television imposed its hegemony over American society. Starting as a medium which the radio comic Fred Allen called "a device that permits

people who haven't anything to do to watch people who can't do anything" (180), television opened all areas of America to scrutiny by every other area. In telling his story of television's growing influence, Halberstam assigns the medium a trifurcate function: reporting, entertaining, and selling. Reporting set out to show the TV audience the America that is, and in the process broke down regional barriers that permitted the South, as one prominent example in Halberstam's book, to maintain a segregationist system in isolation from the rest of the country. Entertaining, through shows like *I love Lucy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *The \$64,000 Question*, showed the audience an idealized America of stable families working their way through resolvable crises or, in the case of the game shows, using their intelligence and competitiveness to overcome long odds. Selling, of course allowed TV to bring the marketplace into the living room and operate as the single greatest influence on consumer behavior available.

What happened was, as we now are beginning to understand, that the reporters who came to prominence grew into stars and celebrities in their own right, glamorizing the news by their very transmission of it. The entertainers, idealized on the screen, Halberstam shows as hostages of their celebrity. He underscores that the Nelsons, the Ricardos, all the celebrated entertainers he chronicles, were dysfunctional, driven by the need to succeed, control, and dominate. The ads created for the viewers these same inner hungers and desires and offered the means for satisfying them. Dominating all were the images and television's power to convey an image-saturated landscape so that today, wherever we travel in the American landscape we're either surprised to find or disappointed to learn that it looks just like it did on television.

Halberstam, to my way of thinking, looks at the television industry's birth from a contemporary perspective very much aware that the demarcations between reporting, entertaining, and selling no longer hold. The categories have become indistinguishable—infotainment, mini-series, re-enacted documentaries, entertaining ads, and so on. It was during the sixties that this explosion of the boundaries occurred; the process has since then merely accelerated. This reader wishes that Halberstam had offered a conceptual framework for understanding this process. *The Fifties*, when all is said and done, is for Halberstam not so much a history of a decade as it is a welter of images, present to the memory but unplugged from the past.